

CAMP LIFE OF CONTRABANDS
AND FREEDMEN,
1861-1865

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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ATLANTA, GEORGIA

AUGUST 1979

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CHAPTER I

ENTERING CAMPGROUND

Introduction:

"Contrabands" were runaway, abandoned, and confiscated slaves kept in custody of the Union Army and renamed "freedmen" after the Emancipation Proclamation. During the Civil War, the army maintained contraband and freedmen camps in which the former slaves endured a multiplicity of privations. This paper is an investigation of the camp life experience of contrabands and freedmen.

The first camps were an unplanned expediency of war, the result of army inundation with runaway slaves. Precedent was set in May 1861 at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, where three fugitives increased to eleven in two days, forty-nine in four days, and in three months to nearly a thousand contrabands.¹ The fortress was hailed "Freedom Fort," to which slaves in the tide-water region of Virginia escaped.²

During the spring and summer of 1861, a constant stream of Maryland and Virginia slaves made their way into Washington and the District of Columbia. A jail in the Old Capitol was reserved to accomodate them.³ Contraband camps were thrown up at Arlington Heights, Mason's Island, Alexandria, and City Point.⁴ "Field hands, old men, women, and children trickled over the Long Bridge day after day and month after month."⁵

Meanwhile, Missouri and Arkansas slaves were "stampeding" to Union outposts to avoid removal deeper into the Confederacy with rebel owners.⁶ Fugitives who made their way into St. Louis were rounded up by the police and ushered to jail. Aid societies helped to place hundreds more in homes and shelters throughout the city.⁷

In the autumn of 1862, further advances by the Union Army into Western Tennessee brought wagon loads of fugitives into federal lines.⁸ Camps were hastily organized at LaGrange and Grand Junction, Tennessee and Corinth, Mississippi. The arrival of the fugitives was likened to the "oncoming of cities."⁹

Thus, "when northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation."¹⁰ They were, however, reluctant and unwilling liberators. They recoiled at the sudden appearance of so many freedom seeking fugitives. Throughout the lower Mississippi, fugitives were barred entry to Union camps. Special guard regiments were formed to keep them out.¹¹ Yet, the slaves were not deterred. "Their own interests were identical, they felt, with the objects of our armies."¹²

Mistreatment of contrabands by soldiers was common and widespread. At Fortress Monroe, "There have been some exceptions, but the rule has been brutal and cruel in the extreme."¹³ The attitudes and action of officers and soldiers were both cruel and violent. Many bluecoats were confederate sympathizers and Negro-haters. Union pickets regularly robbed and detained fugitives until their owners came, paid a ransom, and took them back to slavery.¹⁴ In the Department of the Tennessee so much

turmoil was raised between army factions that officers were relieved of command for disobeying "orders to turn all fugitives out of the lines."¹⁵ A majority of commanders in this department did not allow fugitives in their camps or else permitted confederate slave hunters to enter and recapture runaways.¹⁶

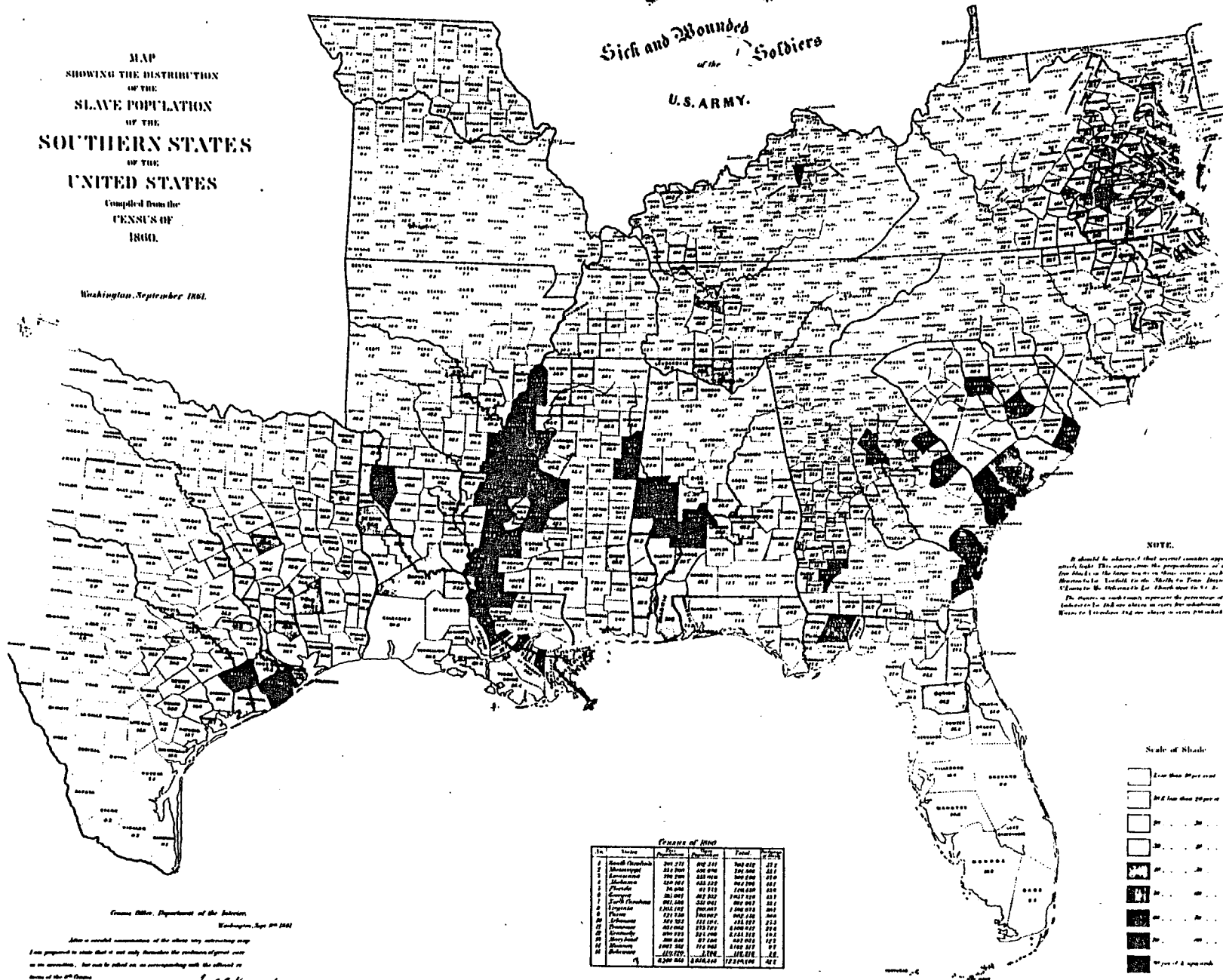
Locations of contraband-freedmen camps followed the invasion routes of the Union Army into regions heavily populated with slaves (See map 1). From Cairo, Illinois down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, camps were numerous and populous. The inception of camps here met with all manner of difficulties. Soldiers refused to guard the contrabands or to serve them in any way not directly ordered.¹⁷ Rebel guerillas marauded and killed refugees wherever found. Civilian sentiments were anti-Union and of course, anti-Negro. Supplies of food, medicine, and clothing were always insufficient to the needs of the refugees.

The early camps at LaGrange, Grand Junction and Corinth were short lived. Confederate forces captured the Union supply base at Holly Springs, Mississippi, forcing immediate evacuation in the autumn of 1862. Contrabands went on foot, mule, wagon, and train into Memphis.¹⁸ By late winter more than six thousand had collected with six thousand more in camps outside the town.¹⁹ Civilian sentiment threatened daily violence against the refugees.²⁰ They were everywhere in the alleys, byways, shacks and shanties. After a light snow, a witness observed, "at every street corner little bonfires had been kindled, around which groups of shivering Negroes were huddled."²¹

MAP
SHOWING THE DISTRIBUTION
OF THE
SLAVE POPULATION
OF THE
SOUTHERN STATES
OF THE
UNITED STATES
Compiled from the
CENSUS OF
1860.

Washington, September 1861.

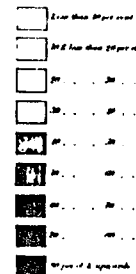
Sold for the benefit of the
Sick and Wounded
of the
U.S. ARMY.



NOTE.

It should be observed that several counties appear unshaded. This is because the population of these counties is less than 100,000. In the larger counties the population is shaded in proportion to the total population of the Southern States. In the smaller counties the population is shaded in proportion to the total population of the Southern States. In the smaller counties the population is shaded in proportion to the total population of the Southern States.

Scale of Shade



Thomas Miller, Department of the Interior,
Washington, Sept 27 1861

After a careful examination of the above very interesting map
I am prepared to state that it not only illustrates the condition of great value
in our country, but can be relied on as corresponding with the official re-
turns of the 31st Census.

John B. Jones, Jr.
Superintendent

No.	State	Population	Slaves	Total	Per Cent
1	South Carolina	201,210	100,210	301,420	33.2
2	Mississippi	151,200	100,000	251,200	39.8
3	Alabama	190,700	100,000	290,700	34.4
4	Georgia	520,000	100,000	620,000	16.1
5	Florida	10,000	10,000	20,000	50.0
6	Louisiana	200,000	100,000	300,000	33.3
7	Arkansas	100,000	100,000	200,000	50.0
8	Texas	100,000	100,000	200,000	50.0
9	Virginia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
10	North Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
11	Tennessee	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
12	Kentucky	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
13	West Virginia	100,000	100,000	200,000	50.0
14	Ohio	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
15	Indiana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
16	Illinois	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
17	Michigan	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
18	Wisconsin	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
19	Iowa	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
20	Minnesota	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
21	Nebraska	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
22	Kansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
23	Oklahoma	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
24	Idaho	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
25	Montana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
26	Wyoming	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
27	Utah	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
28	Nevada	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
29	Arizona	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
30	New Mexico	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
31	Colorado	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
32	Wyoming	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
33	Idaho	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
34	Montana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
35	Nebraska	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
36	Kansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
37	Oklahoma	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
38	Arkansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
39	Mississippi	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
40	Alabama	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
41	Georgia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
42	Florida	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
43	South Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
44	North Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
45	Tennessee	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
46	Kentucky	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
47	West Virginia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
48	Ohio	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
49	Indiana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
50	Illinois	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
51	Michigan	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
52	Wisconsin	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
53	Iowa	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
54	Minnesota	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
55	Nebraska	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
56	Kansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
57	Oklahoma	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
58	Arkansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
59	Mississippi	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
60	Alabama	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
61	Georgia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
62	Florida	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
63	South Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
64	North Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
65	Tennessee	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
66	Kentucky	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
67	West Virginia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
68	Ohio	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
69	Indiana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
70	Illinois	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
71	Michigan	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
72	Wisconsin	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
73	Iowa	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
74	Minnesota	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
75	Nebraska	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
76	Kansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
77	Oklahoma	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
78	Arkansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
79	Mississippi	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
80	Alabama	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
81	Georgia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
82	Florida	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
83	South Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
84	North Carolina	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
85	Tennessee	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
86	Kentucky	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
87	West Virginia	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
88	Ohio	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
89	Indiana	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
90	Illinois	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
91	Michigan	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
92	Wisconsin	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
93	Iowa	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
94	Minnesota	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
95	Nebraska	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
96	Kansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
97	Oklahoma	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
98	Arkansas	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
99	Mississippi	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1
100	Alabama	1,000,000	100,000	1,100,000	9.1

Chart 1.--1863-64 FREEDMEN CAMP POPULATIONS, ESTIMATED AND COUNTED BY THE FRIENDS ASSOCIATION OF PHILADELPHIA.

Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia	15,000
Newbern and Eastern North Carolina	20,000
Norfolk, Portsmouth, Va. and vicinity	20,000
Fortress Monroe and vicinity	10,000
Yorktown, Va. and vicinity	8,000
Alexandria, Va. and vicinity	10,000
Arlington, Va.	3,500
Washington, D.C.	7,500

Camps on and near the Mississippi River

Cairo, Ill.	500
Columbus, Ky.	801
Island No. 10	1,000
Fort Pillow, Ind.	311
Memphis and vicinity	10,682
Helena, Ark.	1,925
Island No. 63	75
Mouth of the White River, Ark.	500
Little Rock, Ark.	700
Pine Bluff, Ark.	1,500
Duwall's Bluff	200
Skipworth's Landing	500
Goodrich's Landing	1,600
Paw Paw Island	870
Milliken's Bend	625
Van Buren's Hospital	575
Vicksburg and vicinity	6,500
Young's Point	3,000
Burnett's Plantation	1,425
Blake's Plantation	625
Davis Bend	1,325
Natchez and vicinity	7,100
Vidalia	930
Port Adams	2,000
Port Hudson	3,000
Baton Rouge	2,000
New Orleans	6,000

and refugee slaves who followed General Sherman's army through parts of Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia

30,000

180,269

*camp residents typically numbered higher in women, children and aged. Healthy men and boys lived mostly with the army as laborers and soldiers.

All around Memphis, the military pass system regulated the movements of civilians, soldiers, and contrabands.²²

Vagrant refugees in the city were routed to camps at President's Island, Camp Fiske, and Camp Shiloh. On President's Island the contraband camp was situated nearest the Tennessee shore. Here, isolation enhanced the well being of the refugees by minimizing contacts with hostile whites. But during the spring, rising flood waters caused much discomfort. Most residents were housed in cabins of their own construction. Woodcutting was the primary industry and the means by which city residents and the government were supplied with construction lumber and winter fuel.²³

Camps Shiloh and Fiske were south of town on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. By December 1863 six hundred freedmen were organized into a well prospering camp at Shiloh. Their livelihood was due mainly to the nearness of Fort Pickering where the men found work in the Army Engineer Corps. Women worked as cooks and laundresses.²⁴ Two miles further south was Camp Fiske, also a prospering camp. Streets were arranged in a parallelogram with ample garden space between the cabins. Here, as elsewhere, intruders posed a constant threat to the peace and well being of camp residents. The army was compelled to train and arm the able bodied men, forming them into a police corps for defense of the camp.²⁵

Also at Memphis, a reception place for contrabands was described as "a field appropriated to them, and as they arrive in the city they are taken out. . .and herded together without shelter or any comforts."²⁶ From here, most were transferred

to camps or to plantations for work assignments. Still, refugee slaves crowded practically every hovel and shack in Memphis. Many were homeless and hungry in the streets.

At Helena, Arkansas runaway and abandoned slaves gathered in numbers that fluctuated between 2,500 and 4,000. In the winter 1862-3 approximately 1,800 men, 1,200 women, and 1,000 children filled the town, mostly living in a place on the outskirts called "Camp Ethiopia" in condemned tents, caves, and makeshift shrub shelters. The greater number were entirely dependent on the army for food, shelter, and clothing. One third were counted self supporting, and worked mainly as wood cutters, haulers, and corders. That same winter an outbreak of smallpox ravaged amongst them. Destitution prevailed.²⁷

Further south, Vicksburg and vicinity became the locus of twenty thousand uprooted, homeless contrabands who "were crowded together, sickly, disheartened, dying on the streets. . ."²⁸ A great many shacks and shanties were put up outside army breastworks to house some.²⁹ Two thousand town-residing refugees were victimized by exorbitant rents. Families were charged as much as twenty dollars a month for one room ramshackle shelter.³⁰

Around the town, other camps were established at Desoto Landing, Birney Plantation, Milliken's Bend, Pawpaw Island, Goodrich Landing, Youngs Point, and Davis Bend. Populations ranged from a low of five hundred upwards to six thousand.³¹ Tri-monthly army reports revealed that camps were often evacuated and residents relocated over considerable distances. As needed, able bodied men and boys were herded separately and impressed

into government service.³² Throughout the region the army pass system excluded vagrant contrabands from the boundaries of Vicksburg.³³ They were left to fend for themselves or directed to specified camps.

Twenty-five miles further south, enclosed in a 25,000 acre peninsula on the east side of the river was Davis Bend. Here the federals captured six hundred abandoned slaves, principally the chattel of Jefferson and Joseph Davis. Thousands more from the surrounding countryside followed the army to the bend and set up as best they could.³⁴

General Grant proposed that the bend be transformed into a paradise for freedmen.³⁵ Safety and seclusion were primary considerations. But shortly after the establishment of campsites, rebel guerillas invaded and murdered several refugees, many of whom fled to the forests. Soon afterwards a federal gunboat was stationed at the narrow neck of the peninsula to prevent entry of hostile whites.³⁶

The army's plan for a Davis Bend freedmen's colony was also threatened by private Union investors who were eager to take over the abandoned plantations. To prevent encroachment, orders were issued in March 1864 reserving three nearby islands and the entire peninsula for military purposes. No white person excepting military personnel were permitted residence or allowed to enter any part of the reserved land.³⁷

Most of the abandoned slaves were quartered on the plantations of their former owners. Those on the Davis and Quitman places practiced a system of self-government established in

antebellum times. With each day, incoming refugees swelled the population. The army was quick to encourage the continuation of their semi autonomy.³⁸ A system of judiciary was developed and controlled at every level by the freedmen. Three judges and three sheriffs presided over subdivided districts. Accused persons were granted a choice of judge or jury trial; after sentencing, the court filed a statement with the local superintendent who regularly acceded, intervening only in cases where sentences were thought too severe. Punishments were usually light, a small fine or a short term of labor for idleness or petty theft. Offensive crime was almost nonexistent.³⁹

Field work was the principal occupation of Davis Bend refugees. They also cultivated their own garden plots and fished to sustain themselves. Other occupations included cook, house servant, and shoemaker. Most of the work was performed by old men, women, and children. From the original six hundred, the Davis Bend colony grew to six thousand residents at the war's end.⁴⁰

At Natchez, December 1863, four thousand refugees were gathered in poor little cabins, all of which were cold and overcrowded. Death and disease were rampant through the fall and winter. At one point, as many as seventy-five refugees died in a single day. To escape frightful misery, some refugees returned to their former owners. By spring 1864 only two thousand remained.⁴¹

To be sure, orphans were numerous. Special camps called "Home Farms" were designated for orphaned, elderly, and injured

refugees. A network of Home Farms were scattered from Memphis to Davis Bend, sheltering helpless refugees from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. In them, juveniles able to work were responsible for maintaining camp facilities, including gardening, cabin construction, cooking, etc. The elderly were likewise employed, but more often their residence would terminate as soon as outside employment was found for them.⁴²

New arrivals, transients, sick and wounded were also collected in "Infirmary Farms." Families of freedmen soldiers were put up in "Regimental Villages." Operating funds for these special camps were obtained from a wage tax deducted from the pay of all working freedmen. In that way, the government was able to save a great deal of money.⁴³

On the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, major centers of contraband-freedmen activity were at Clarksville, Nashville, Gallatin, Huntsville and Camp Nelson in Kentucky. In the winter 1863 orders were issued mandating the Nashville camp:

The quartermaster's department will furnish all materials necessary to shelter and protect the negroes destined to be located in this camp. If practicable, the contrabands will be quartered in log houses, to be constructed by the negroes themselves; but in the interim, tents will be furnished for their accommodation. The several staff departments will issue all supplies necessary for the wants of these people on the requisition of the officer in charge of the camp.⁴⁴

Later investigation revealed the cabins were not constructed but instead the refugees had been put to work building a residence for the commanding officer with materials intended for the contraband camp. At the campsite no army effort had

been made to assist in housing the refugees beyond the provision of poor quality tents:

such as they were, were wholly insufficient in number, and in consequence were crowded beyond their capacity, in order that they might seem to shelter the inmates of the camp, very many were sick and died from neglect.⁴⁵

Shortage of food, clothing, and medicine were frequent and prolonged. A commissary store for the contrabands was closed for lengthy periods due to the ill health of the operator and lack of supplies. Most of the adults in camp were without a change of clothing and many of the children were entirely naked.⁴⁶

The commanding officer, Major General Rousseau, was notoriously sympathetic to local confederates. Slave owners in and around Nashville frequently petitioned for the return of their runaways and were granted repossession upon condition the fugitives were willing to go. In the whole Department of the Cumberland, contrabands were readily returned to slavery with the consent of Rousseau and his subordinates.⁴⁷

A freedmen's camp was organized at Clarksville in April 1863. Here the refugees were left to provide for themselves and were not hindered much by military supervision. Three months after inception the population totaled 1,674, of which 550 were men, 557 women, and 567 children. The campsite was about a mile outside the town on a one hundred acre farm. The men were occupied in farming, woodcutting, and hauling. They cut timber at a nearby sawmill and built long rectangular barracks partitioned into 14 x 14 rooms with a double chimney,

each room with a separate fireplace.⁴⁸

Between April and July 1863, 133 men, 149 women, and 95 children were discharged or relocated to other camps. Another 136 men enlisted in the military. Deaths numbered 83, 5 men, 6 women, and 72 children.⁴⁹

The camp at Gallatin was similar except that its residents were more frequently victimized by return to slavery. Most were women and children, the families of freedmen soldiers. Protection was so lax that slaveowners hardly needed Union collaboration to reclaim fugitive property.⁵⁰

In December 1863 a camp was founded at Huntsville, Alabama on the estate of the ex-governor. At the start, five hundred freedmen were quartered here and rationed "one pound of cornmeal, six ounces of bacon or pork, and a little salt to each person per day."⁵¹ They supplemented their needs by foraging, farming, and fishing. Late in the spring they planted 280 acres of corn, seven acres of sugar cane, and a large vegetable garden. They built barracks to replace worn out old tents, a school where more than one hundred children attended, and a church where they regularly worshipped, nourishing their fervent spiritual needs.⁵²

A Kentucky outpost, Camp Nelson, sheltered mostly freedmen soldier's families. Local sentiment was so hostile that Union officials ordered the camp disbanded to placate bitter whites. In November 1864 all the residents were evicted, their cabins and huts torn down, their provisions scattered and ruined. Many soon died of exposure. Shortly afterwards the orders were

rescinded and the refugees herded back to begin anew. They were issued small amounts of used clothing, blankets, and food.⁵³ The army contracted to rebuild the camp with barracks, a kitchen, a laundry, workshop, and a school. The women worked long hours sewing and mending discarded uniforms, transforming them into useful clothing for themselves and their children. By mid-January 1865 most residents were housed in barracks, but many lived in the mess house and in crude little huts. Many more were confined to a hospital. Suffering was so great nearly one fifth of their number sickened and died.⁵⁴

With the capture of New Orleans and the southern half of Louisiana, the Department of the Gulf was established in April 1862. Then an estimated ten thousand fugitive slaves had collected in the crescent city. Large contraband camps were organized at Forts Jackson and St. Philip below the city and at Camp Parapet and Baton Rouge to the north.⁵⁵ In two years the number of refugees crowded into New Orleans increased to thirty thousand.⁵⁶ Most were vagrant and homeless in the streets, sleeping where they found shelter, eating and working when they could.

When the army pressed into the interior of Louisiana, in its wake "men and women of a hundred years of age, under strength imparted by the sweet prospect of liberty, marched with almost the alacrity of persons half their age."⁵⁷ Contrabands rode in "three decked wagons" full of "pickaninnies," on "lame old mules," and on foot, "almost everyone bearing on head or in hand

something from the old home--a huge bundle of cotton, a ham, skillet, or dish."⁵⁸ One Union officer wrote:

My train is larger than an army for 25,000 men. Every soldier had a negro marching in the flanks, carrying his knapsack.⁵⁹

The army had nothing to spare this sudden horde of refugees. They ate what they carried away from their former homes and foraged the fields and abandoned farms, or they ate not at all. But their increase was persistent, making them "a perfect nuisance" to war minded generals.⁶⁰

Similar scenes were witnessed in South Carolina at Port Royal. Here, eleven thousand abandoned slaves were captured in the autumn 1862 in Beaufort and on nearby islands.⁶¹ From the surrounding region, fugitives, burdened with every article they possessed, bedding, cooking utensils, children and livestock, streamed into Beaufort going "to freedom."⁶² They were quartered in churches, storehouses, jails and arsenals. Tents were put up and barracks were built to accomodate them. Fugitives arrived hourly in families, gangs, and individually. The town was so completely and suddenly overcrowded with refugees, Union whites renamed it "Nigger's Heaven."⁶³

Military excursions up the coastal rivers brought continuous arrivals:

When the gunboats touched the shore, the news spread like wildfire. Men, women, and children rushed frantically to them, begging to be taken on board. . .those left behind unprotected, ran along the shore and even rushed into the water, uttering the most heart-rending moans and wailings, which continued until the boat was out of sight and sound.⁶⁴

Beaufort was a town in constant commotion with the coming and going of the military and Union civilians mixed with the incessant movements of unsettled refugees. The contrabands performed a variety of duties for the quartermaster's department, or else secured employment from officers, soldiers and proprietors. Most were dependent on the government throughout the winter until the planting season when they were put to fieldwork.⁶⁵

Eight thousand Port Royal contrabands were scattered on more than a dozen sea islands and one hundred fifty plantations.⁶⁶ The government was quick to exploit an opportunity to produce food and cotton. Refugees were put to work on day long schedules in government cotton fields and only allowed evenings and off days to cultivate their own gardens. They supported themselves by raising an abundance of corn, potatoes, chickens, pigs, and ducks. They sold and traded their surpluses in town for clothing, coffee, sugar, and tobacco.⁶⁷

By February 1864 more than 19,000 freedmen were collected in North Carolina camps, mostly along the seacoast at New Bern, Plymouth, Washington, and Roanoke Island.⁶⁸ Three separate sites were started at New Bern, two of which were outside federal picket lines. This same month, Confederates attacked both camps, killing and capturing many residents, and stampeding the remainder into the town. They pursued and killed the refugees until they reached cover of Union guns.⁶⁹ After the attack, one consolidated camp was put up on the shore of the Trent

River. Refugees were quartered in tents, cabins, outhouses, kitchens, and rundown old buildings.⁷⁰

Once settled, efforts were begun to make the camp into a habitable home for freedmen. The men laid out streets, built cabins, and planted gardens. In time the camp was furnished with a soldier's and freedmen's hospital, a blacksmith shop, a variety store, stables, cook-houses, schools and churches. Industry and good fortune converted a once squalid camp into a prosperous "African Village."⁷¹

The town of Plymouth was attacked and captured two months after the battle at New Bern. Escapees fled to Washington, and from there marched to New Bern, Beaufort (N.C.), and Roanoke Island.⁷²

The original camp at Roanoke sheltered the families of freedmen soldiers and sick and wounded contrabands. Most were housed in barracks at the north end of the island. The influx from Plymouth, Washington, and New Bern kept the menfolk busy cutting timber and building cabins. Single acre plots were assigned to individual families. Within six months more than three hundred cabins were constructed and as many vegetable gardens planted and cultivated.⁷³

Women and children joined in with the men in masonry, carpentry, and gardening. They also fished the channels for herring, mullet, shad, blue fish, oysters, and crabs. After all supporting industries were developed, schools and churches soon followed. The first church was in the open air, with pine trees cut for benches, a pulpit made from discarded wood boxes,

and a roof over arched with pine boughs. In the evenings, after a day's labor, hymns were sung in almost every cabin, and prayers sent heavenward in sincerest thanks to God.⁷⁴

A January 1864 census tabulated 3,091 residents at Roanoke; 1,295 males, 1,796 females, 1,297 children under age fourteen, and 1,794 children between fourteen and eighteen. All able bodied men between eighteen and forty-five had been removed to serve in the army, leaving the adolescent boys and old men, women and girls as the primary labor force.⁷⁵

An experiment in self government was initiated here in the winter 1864. Fifteen freedmen judged experienced and wise were appointed to a council. They were expected to exert a restraining influence over camp residents and to act as a medium through which orders of their superintendent and military authorities could be communicated and enforced. The effort failed. Rivalries arose between council members and the extent of their influence was less than hoped for. Another reason for failure was the councilors' inability to make or receive written communications.⁷⁶

In spite of many difficulties, Roanoke prospered. In time a corps of dedicated teachers was recruited to help transform the colony of illiterate former slaves into a Bible reading community of freedmen.⁷⁷

By winter 1864 32,000 freedmen refugees were behind federal lines in Virginia, 15,000 on the eastern shore of Maryland, and 42,000 in the District of Columbia.⁷⁸ A number of

independent settlements sprang up in and around Washington. To relieve the city of surplus freedmen, many were shipped to Port Royal to labor in government cotton fields.⁷⁹ Those refugees who remained in the city were victimized by "sharpers" who rented them crude little shacks at cutthroat prices.⁸⁰ The government provided housing for some in a slum, Duff Green's Row, a few blocks from the Capitol. The camp was decimated by smallpox in late 1862. Survivors relocated to a camp on Twelfth Street and elsewhere about the city.⁸¹

Virginia tidewater fugitives kept the District of Columbia camps populated. Likewise, Union positions in Virginia were nearly overrun. In some instances seventy to one hundred and twenty wagon loads guided and assisted by freedmen soldiers rolled into camp at Hampton, Yorktown, and Cranly Island.⁸² The refugees on the island were mostly the wives and children of these same soldiers and they were "penned together and fed like cattle."⁸³ After a few months labor, cabins and barracks were built and regular fishing was begun to supplement and improve their army issued food.⁸⁴ Shortages of all essential supplies were frequent, due in part to four hundred per day increases in camp populations.⁸⁵

On the Potomac River 3,000 freedmen camped at Arlington Heights.⁸⁶ They were at first subjected to bitter racism. "Some of them had been barbarously treated."⁸⁷ Like the residents of the camp at Alexandria, they struggled for subsistence. In both cases, the freedmen farmed abandoned estates and worked in various capacities for the government. Both camps developed

into self supporting units with decent housing, stores, churches, hospitals, homes for the invalid, and a \$500 school at Alexandria.⁸⁸

From the Potomac to the Gulf of Mexico, the Union Army was nearly overwhelmed with a flood of fugitive and abandoned slaves. Camps to shelter them were all begun in misery. Some, after long struggle, developed into semi-stable, hard working communities. But materials and supplies were prioritized for military use and efforts to alleviate suffering amongst the refugees were always insufficient to their needs. Being refugees of both slavery and war, contrabands and freedmen were caught in a peculiar predicament. They lived on the run, hungry, naked, sick, and wounded but with one clear objective, Freedom. They sought it desperately and paid with their lives.⁸⁹

¹James Parton, General Butler in New Orleans, (New York: Mason Brothers, 1864), p. 129.

²Ibid., p. 131.

³Margaret Leech, Reveille in Washington 1860-1865, (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p. 141.

⁴Report of the Executive Committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Upon the Condition and Needs of the Freed People of Color in Washington and Virginia, (E. Anthony and Sons, 1864), p. 7.

⁵Constance M. Green, The Secret City, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 58.

⁶John Y. Simon, ed. The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, 5 vols. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 2:16.

⁷Western Sanitary Commission, The Western Sanitary Commission; A Sketch of its Origin, History, Labors for the Sick and Wounded of the Western Armies, and Aid Given to the Freedmen and Union Refugees, with Incidents of Hospital Life. (St. Louis: Published for the Mississippi Valley Sanitary Fair. R.P. Studley and Co., 1864), p. 125.

⁸John Eaton and Ethel Osgood Mason, Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley, (1907; rpt. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 12.

⁹Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰W. E. B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935, 1962), p. 55.

¹¹U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, Department of the Tennessee and State of Arkansas, for 1864, 98p. (Memphis: Published by permission, 1865), p. 6.

¹²Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 2.

¹³Emancipation League, Facts Concerning the Freedmen. Their Capacity and Their Destiny. Collected and Published by the Emancipation League. (Boston: Press of Commercial Printing House, 1863), p. 5.

¹⁴American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, Preliminary Report Touching on the Condition and Management of Emancipated Refugees; Made to the Secretary of War, by the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, June 30, 1863. (New York: J. F. Trow, Printer, 1863), p. 12.

¹⁵Eaton, Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen, p. 48.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁹Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Association of Friends for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedmen. (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Sons, Printers, 1865), p. 9.

²⁰Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 28.

²¹Ibid., p. 31.

²²U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, 1864, p. 16.

²³James Yeatman, A Report on the Condition of the Freedmen of the Mississippi, Presented to the Western Sanitary Commission December 17th, 1863, by James E. Yeatman. (St. Louis: Western Sanitary Commission Rooms, 1864), pp. 3,4.

²⁴Ibid., p. 4.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 1, 2; Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 57.

²⁶Board of Managers, First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, p. 9.

²⁷Western Sanitary Commission, The Western Sanitary Commission, p. 111; Emancipation League, Facts Concerning Freedmen, p. 6; Yeatman, Report on the Condition of the Freedmen, p. 5.

²⁸Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 105.

²⁹Extracts from Documents in the Office of the General Superintendent of Freedmen of Refugees and Freedmen. (Headquarters, Memphis, Tennessee, March 1865), pp. 26, 27.

³⁰Office of General Superintendent of Freedmen, Orders and Circulars Issued and Received, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-72, National Archives Building, Record Group 105, Entry 2028.

*Hereafter records in the National Archives Building are indicated by the abbreviation N. A.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., N. A., Entry 2152.

³³U. S. Army, Department of the Tennessee. Extracts from Documents in the Office of the General Superintendent of Refugees and Freedmen, March 1865. (Memphis, Tennessee: Freedmen Press, 1865), p. 24.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 21, 26.

³⁵Ibid., p. 39.

³⁶Yeatman, Report on the Condition of the Freedmen, p. 13.

³⁷U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents, p. 41.

³⁸Walter L. Fleming, "Jefferson Davis and the Negro Problem," University Bulletin IV (Louisiana State University) (October 1908), p. 7.

³⁹Eaton, Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen, pp. 165, 166; Vernon Lane Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 40.

⁴⁰N. A., R. G. 105, Entry 2128.

⁴¹Yeatman, Report on the Condition of the Freedmen, pp. 13, 14.

⁴²Extracts from Documents, pp. 22, 30, and U. S. Treasury Department, Report Relative to Leasing Abandoned Plantations and Affairs of the Freed People in First Special Agency. By W. P. Mellen, Feb. 11, 1864. (Washington, D.C.: McGill and Witherow Printers and Stereotypers, 1864), p. 8.

⁴³Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 130.

⁴⁴U. S. Congress, Letter of the Secretary of War, Communicating in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of the 11th Instant, a copy of the Report of Hon. Thomas Hood and Hon. S. W. Bostwick, Special Commissioners Upon the Condition and Treatment of Colored Refugees in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama. Senate Executive Document No. 28, 30th Congress, 2nd Session. February 27, 1865, pp. 1, 2.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 9, 10.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 11.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 12; Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Second Annual Report of the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Cincinnati, Ohio. (Cincinnati: Printed at the Methodist Book Concern, 1865), p. 29.

⁵²U. S. Congress, Letter of the Secretary of War, p. 12.

⁵³Ibid., p. 18; Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Second Annual Report, p. 30.

⁵⁴Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Second Annual Report, p. 30.

⁵⁵Parton, General Butler in New Orleans, p. 522.

⁵⁶U. S. Army Department of the Gulf, Report on the Condition of the Freedmen of the Department of the Gulf, to Major General N. P. Banks, Commanding, by Chaplain T. W. Conway, U.S.A. Superintendent Bureau of Free Labor. (New Orleans: H. P. Lathrop, Printer, 1864), p. 9.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁸United Presbyterian Church, Historical Sketch of the Freedmen's Missions of the United Presbyterian Church 1862-1904. (Knoxville, Tennessee: Printing Department Knoxville College, 1904), p. 21.

⁵⁹Parton, General Butler in New Orleans, p. 580.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Educational Commission. (Boston: Published at the Office of the Society, 1864), p. 17; George R. Bentley, A History of the Freedmen's Bureau, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955), p. 3.

⁶²Elizabeth H. Botume, First Days Amongst the Contrabands, (Boston: Lee and Shephard Publishers, 1893), pp. 15, 16.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 16, 78.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 14, 15.

⁶⁵New England Educational Commission, Extracts from Letters of Teachers and Superintendents of the New England Educational Commission for Freedmen. Fourth Series January 1, 1864. (Boston: David Clapp, Printer, 334 Washington St., 1864), p. 13.

⁶⁶U. S. Treasury Department, The Negroes at Port Royal. Report of E. L. Pierce, Government Agent to the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury. (Boston: Published by R. F. Wallcut, 1862), p. 4.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 23; New England Educational Commission, Extracts from Letters, p. 6.

⁶⁸Horace James, Annual Report of the Superintendent of Negro Affairs in North Carolina, 1864. With an Appendix, Containing the History and Management of Freedmen up to June 1, 1865. (Boston: W. F. Brown and Co., 1865), p. 3.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁰Vincent Colyer, Brief Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army in North Carolina, in the Spring of 1862, After the Battle of Newbern. (New York: Published by the Author, 105 Bleeker Street, 1864), p. 35.

⁷¹Horace James, Annual Report, p. 8.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 73.

⁷⁴Vincent Colyer, Brief Report, pp. 36, 39.

⁷⁵Horace James, Annual Report, p. 26.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 30; New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 74.

⁷⁷Horace James, Annual Report, p. 29.

⁷⁸New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, pp. 26, 34.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 35.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Allen Nevins, The War for the Union: The Organized War 1863-1864. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1971), p. 425.

⁸²New England Educational Commission, Extracts from Letters, p. 12.

⁸³L. P. Jackson, "The Origin of Hampton Institute," Journal of Negro History, (April 1952), p. 135.

⁸⁴Emancipation League, Facts Concerning the Freedmen, p. 3.

⁸⁵New England Educational Commission, Extracts from Letters, p. 12.

⁸⁶New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Report of the Executive Committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Upon the Condition and Needs of the Freed People of Color in Washington and Virginia. (New Bedford: E. Anthony and Sons, 1864), p. 5.

⁸⁷New York Yearly Meeting of Friends, Third Report of a Committee of the Representatives of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends Upon the Condition and Wants of the Colored Refugees, 1864, p. 14.

⁸⁸New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Report of the Executive Committee, p. 25; Margaret Leech, Reveille in Washington, p. 251.

CHAPTER II

MEETING DEATH

Contrabands and freedmen lived and died under relentlessly hostile conditions. Their flight from slavery in time of war put vengeful owners, slave catchers, and the Confederate army on their track. As fugitives they were driven not only by want of freedom, but by threat of recapture and murder. "A blind terror stung them, and an equally blind hope allured them."¹

Slave owners proved vicious and deadly in their attempts to keep possession of freedom bound chattel. Some would rather have waded knee deep in blood than see their slaves free.² To prevent Union capture, many removed their property and slaves to inland hideaways. When the slaves balked, they were shot. Contrabands at Port Royal said, "They had been shot down. . . like dogs, because they would not go off with their masters."³ Whites were shooting them right and left to drive them into the interior.⁴

A panic swept the Confederates at Port Royal when the Union invasion was launched. They committed a number of atrocities before abandoning the area. They burned slaves alive in cotton storehouses and murdered them on plantations.⁵ A witness reported, "one man shot six of his negroes," another reported

thirty shot down for refusing to flee.⁶ Slaves hid in the forests and swamps to save themselves and await the invaders.⁷

The same was true in North Carolina where retreating rebels murdered as many resistant slaves as they could find.⁸ Missouri and Arkansas slaves were murdered and driven from their homes by their owners and rebel guerrillas.⁹ In north Alabama, "the rebels actually butchered about a thousand blacks, to prevent them from falling in to the hands of the Union Army."¹⁰ Two hundred were locked in a large building and burned to death.¹¹ Slave owners in the Lexington area of Kentucky violently expelled their slaves because their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons had run off and enlisted in the Union Army. Women and children were whipped, stabbed, burned, shot, and maimed. Escaping refugees said "they were treated like or worse than dogs."¹² Everywhere the Union invasion aroused bitter anger which the Confederates vented on the slaves.

Once fugitives escaped their owners they were often met by a more vicious enemy. Rebel guerrillas conducted a campaign of terror not only against Union forces, but against refugee slaves from one end of the Confederacy to the other. Guerillas comprised part of the force that recaptured Plymouth, North Carolina in 1864. After the Union guns were silenced, the rag-tag rebels methodically and brutally butchered every freedmen captured in a blue uniform. Civilian refugees were dispatched with no less cruelty. Only a few escaped by hiding in the swamps outside the town.¹³

In twelve months, guerrillas captured and killed a repor-

ted 967 freedmen from ninety-five safe, well protected Union plantations along the Mississippi.¹⁴ In some instances recaptured freedmen were resold into slavery or put to merciless labor for the Confederacy. Most were killed, or "stripped naked and whipped nearly to death."¹⁵ Shifts in refugee camp sites were always made when the army left one region to battle in another. Exposed freedmen in remote camps fled to the river towns to escape marauding rebels. Those who reached safety came in naked, gashed, and bleeding.¹⁶

The whole Gulf Department of southern Louisiana was infested with guerrillas whose cruelties found no limit. Southwest parishes were frequently raided, costing the lives of Union whites and freedmen laborers.¹⁷ A Union Army memorandum notes an example of guerrilla activity; "They were armed with double barreled guns and at the time of their capture were engaged in hunting negroes."¹⁸ Freedmen in the vicinity of Camp Parapet, were threatened day and night with torture and murder. Warfare directed against them was both cruel and vindictive.¹⁹

In addition, the Confederate Army practiced an unwritten policy of extermination, killing freedmen indiscriminately in frequent massacres and atrocities. They left a trail of blood across Tennessee where "All contrabands captured by rebels on the Federal wagon-trains are immediately shot. Twenty thus killed are lying on the Murfreesboro Pike."²⁰ After the battle of Stones River, a federal hospital boat was captured and all freedmen employees gunned down. Union ships on the Cumberland River were also captured and destroyed. White Unionists were

harshly treated, "But for the poor negroes no kind of cruelty was deemed too severe by their captors."²¹ Most were stripped naked, tied to trees and scourged. Afterwards they were shot down and left to rot.²²

The most infamous massacre of the war, Fort Pillow, Tennessee, was preceded by a dawn attack on a neighboring freedmen's camp. Approximately three hundred refugee slaves were in camp on April 12, 1863. At the first sign of attack most fled to the fort. But the rebel force struck so swiftly the fort was soon overrun. The Union forces hoisted a flag of surrender and threw down their arms. Then:

The rebels commenced an indiscriminate slaughter, sparing neither age nor sex, white or black, soldier or civilian. The officers and men seemed to vie with each other in the devilish work; men, women, and even children wherever found, were deliberately shot down, beaten and hacked with sabres; some of the children not more than ten years old were made to stand up and face their murderers while being shot. . . All around were heard cries of "No quarter! No quarter! Kill the damn niggers; shoot them down."²³

In all, some six hundred former slaves were murdered, three hundred civilians and three hundred freedmen soldiers. Barely fifty survivors, most of whom were white, escaped to tell the story.²⁴

A freedmen's camp at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana was similarly overrun before rebels staged an unsuccessful attack on a garrison of freedmen troops. They waged a bitter battle for most of a day attempting to slaughter all the former slaves gathered there.²⁵

Perhaps the most incredible atrocity of the war was perpetrated at Brashear City, Louisiana in June 1863. Nearly two

thousand freedmen, mostly women, children, and old men were collected in camp west of New Orleans. A regiment of the Texas cavalry surprised and quickly subdued two hundred Union guard troops. Then they began a slaughter of the freedmen "in the most shocking manner. The cry of the sucking babe, the prayer of the aged, the shrieks of the mother had no effect."²⁶ Two thousand were butchered and two escaped.²⁷

In rare instances freedmen were armed and allowed to protect themselves. Black troops performed camp guard duty more diligently than whites.²⁸ Yet it was a near impossible task to prevent the intrusion of murderers, cut-throats, and slave stealers from the many camp sites.

At the same time, attitudes of indifference, malice, and deceit prevailed amongst Union soldiers toward the freedmen. Upon entering federal lines, refugee slaves often "met prejudices against their color more bitter than any they had left behind."²⁹ From wide theaters of the war, reports confirm hostility and maltreatment: Fortress Monroe, "brutal and cruel in the extreme," Helena, Arkansas, "generally bad--very bad. . . Many officers and their subordinates have been hard, unjust and cruel. . .by ordinary privates of the army they are treated as savages and brutes."³⁰ Morale amongst the freedmen was much depressed where they were tormented by Union whites.³¹

Until late in the war, the federals permitted slave hunters to enter freedmen camps and recapture fugitives.³² Some Union officers were even commended by Confederate newspapers for extending courtesies to slave catchers.³³ An 1864 investi-

gation at Nashville aroused suspicion of a colonel accused of surrendering freedmen in squads to their owners who then "whipped and shot to death their slaves, and were not molested."³⁴

In cities and towns former slaves were shunned and brutalized by civilians and soldiers. Hoodlums roamed the streets of Washington D.C. and attacked refugees "on the least provocation or none."³⁵ At Memphis the threat of civilian violence was manifested in daily abuses.³⁶ Sentiment in Mississippi Valley towns was virulently hostile, so much so that freedmen were denied wages for work. For minor legal offenses freedmen were fined double what whites paid and punished in public, tied to whipping posts and beaten.³⁷ The army's solution to racial abuse was to settle freedmen outside the limits of cities and towns. Memphis, Vicksburg, Beaufort, and Washington were thus surrounded.

At Port Royal, on St. Helena Island, February 1863, federal troops rioted against the freedmen. They stole livestock and valuables, burned all the cabins on the Jenks plantation, robbed and beat the men, and attempted to rape the women. The freedmens superintendent attempted to quell the riot until the soldiers threatened to kill him.³⁸ During the same month, troops in Washington rampaged, beating and stoning freedmen wherever they were found.³⁹

Not surprisingly, crime and vice flourished where white men had access to freedmen camps. Negro haters, abusers, and cheaters were omnipresent. They stole what gold and silver they found, worked the freedmen for no pay, and lured the women

away for defilement.⁴⁰ Union soldiers frequented the camps during idle hours seeking entertainment and debauchery. At Algiers, across the river from New Orleans, soldiers engaged in "Dreadful excesses of Depravity & Lechery."⁴¹ Freedwomen were facetiously labeled "Sable virgins of Africa" and "Sable nymphs" by the fathers of their "little mule" offspring.⁴² The vice of white men was so prevalent, superintendents openly advised freedwomen of the ruin they would suffer for consorting with them.⁴³

Thousands of refugee slaves came into camp ragged, barefoot, sick, wounded, and hungry with few possessions and no comforts. Some wore iron collars locked around their necks, or chains fastened to their ankles and wrists.⁴⁴ Union pickets appropriated their mules, horses, and guns, then directed them to tents, barracks, cabins, and fields to await work assignments. The refugees were desperate for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Winter arrivals at a Nashville camp were squeezed 1,200 into five rooms:

. . .without a fire in any of them. . .fires to cook with were built out of doors, and about them gathered groups of women and children, trying to get warm. They had traveled seventy miles within a week, to find this kind of refuge, escaping the bullets of those on their track, to die of exposure here.⁴⁵

Elsewhere in the town a missionary:

. . .went from hut to hovel around the vicinity selecting the most naked, destitute children and directing them to the point for distribution. Supposing I had invited as many as could be supplied, I repaired to the place for distribution,

and found not only the large room crowded, but the yard around the door with the most miserable looking victims of poverty I ever witnessed. Many little bare feet were standing on the ice and snow. . . Our ladies were busy fitting shoes on one, skirt on another, coat on another, and dividing the best they could and sending off those supplied to make room for others. . . A crowd of crying disappointed ones had to go unsupplied.⁴⁶

Ten thousand were collected in the town, mostly homeless, hungry, sick, freezing, and starving. Disease and death ravaged amongst them.⁴⁷

Army hospitals accumulated a regular supply of cast off uniforms and shoes which were issued to the refugees. Refugee men wore them readily and skilled seamstresses amongst the women mended and altered the garments to fit themselves and their children.⁴⁸ Missionaries supplemented army issue with benevolence from various sources. They collected and distributed clothing, food and medicines to the refugees.⁴⁹ Otherwise suffering would have been worse.

Army food rations were divided in many ways, the least of which went to the former slaves. Soldiers, white employees, and white refugees were supplied first and more sufficiently. Further gradations divided the food to freedmen soldiers, military laborers and servants, and a half ration for children.⁵⁰ Dry rations sometimes included a few ounces of meal, crackers, salt pork or beef per person per day.⁵¹ In some camps the food was prepared in large cooking kettles and issued at mealtime. This method proved economical and helped to stretch short supplies for longer periods.⁵²

In order to subsist the refugees had to forage food in

fields and abandoned farm houses. Freedmen scouts often led refugees back to their former homes to rummage useful provisions.⁵³ Every planting season they put seeds in the ground and cultivated vegetables and fruits which they had to guard against thieving soldiers. They also raised chickens, guineas, and ducks, and fished and hunted.⁵⁴ Their alternative was scurvy and starvation.

Contraband-freedmen camps were more often crowded, squalid, and delapidated places where misery compounded more miseries. Malnourished and exposed, the former slaves were afflicted with a legion of ailments. Chronically sick refugees were put up in Home Farms, Infirmary Farms, and hospitals. But adequate medical attention was a scarce commodity, for want of which many thousands died. Between Memphis and Vicksburg were scattered more than a dozen Home Farms under the care of one assigned physician.⁵⁵ One doctorless farm of 810 at Pine Bluff, Arkansas recorded 1,500 illnesses and 150 deaths in May, June, and July 1864.⁵⁶ Home Farms were not meant to shelter great numbers of refugees. Populations seldom exceeded a thousand. It was in regular camps where populations grew to unmanageable numbers and where the refugees suffered most.

An observer of the Mississippi Valley camps in December 1863 noted the overall condition of the refugees destitute in the extreme. At Young's Point,

There are now some 2,100 in . . . camp, in miserable huts, tents, and hovels. . . The sickness and deaths were most frightful. During the summer from thirty to fifty died in a day, and some days as many as seventy five.⁵⁷

Another visitor wrote, "thousands of people dying, without well ones enough to inter the dead."⁵⁸ Smallpox, cholera, yellow fever, and typhoid festered epidemics in camp sites up and down the river.⁵⁹

Originally, four thousand refugees collected in Natchez. Not one family amongst them was spared loss of life. From one to eleven members perished, sometimes wiping out entire family units. Again, seventy five died in a single day. In a short time the population was cut in half and some refugees were reported to have voluntarily returned to their owners to escape the frightful suffering.⁶⁰

Army Morning Reports recorded a continuous toll of deaths in the Vicksburg district. At the Birney camp, February 1864 through August 1865, freedmen deaths averaged nearly eight per day.⁶¹ On one plantation smallpox killed forty seven of one hundred twenty freedmen.⁶² Ruboela, cholera, and typhoid struck a camp at the mouth of the White River in summer 1864. One hundred ninety five freedmen died in twenty seven days.⁶³

Annual spring floods caused increased misery on river island camps. Unsanitary conditions forced the evacuation and relocation of all residents on Island 102, Paw-Paw Iland, Island 110, and Presidents Island.⁶⁴ The army was never able to provide adequate medical attention to freedmen to combat the spread of disease. Refugee children and aged died first and most often. A rider along the levee from Millikens Bend to Desoto, covered twenty five miles of countless graves, and pitied their suffering. Everywhere they begged, "Are you a doctor?"⁶⁵ In many

instances the freedmen improvised their own remedies, sassafras tea for smallpox. "Doctor" women and men took the place of physicians and nursed the sick and dying.⁶⁶

Winter was a grueling season. During the coldest months between 1863-64, grave-digging was one of the most popular occupations of freedmen at Helena, Arkansas. So many were dying it was not possible to bury them all properly.⁶⁷ Disease at Algiers, Louisiana killed freedmen by the hundreds and they "were buried under the floors of salt warehouses in which they lived."⁶⁸ Through February, March, and April 1863, disease, starvation and exposure claimed 1,200 of 4,000 refugees in a Memphis camp. An army chaplain concluded, "The wonder is, not that so many died, but that so many lived."⁶⁹

New arrivals in the contraband camps were most often absolutely destitute, more so than long term residents. A Union expedition in April 1863, into rebel regions of Mississippi and Alabama brought 4,500 refugees to Davis Bend and Omega Landing. They came in empty handed without blankets or food. For shelter, some settled in the forest along the river bank and built little huts of sod and sticks.⁷⁰ Many were sick and injured. A witness observed the following:

On my way to the Lovell place adjoining the estates of the Davis', I called at a cattle shed without any siding, there huddled together were 35 poor wretchedly helpless negroes, one man who had lost one eye entirely, and the sight of the other fast going, he could do nothing. Five women, all mothers and the residue of 29 children, all small and under 12 years of age. One of the women had smallpox, her face a perfect mess of scales, her children were left uncared for except for what they accidentally received. Another woman was nourishing a little boy about 7 whose early life was

fast ebbing away, she could pay but little attention to the rest of her family. Another was scarcely able to crawl about.⁷¹

Refugee freedmen lived in varying degrees of discomfort. Near Beaufort, South Carolina, a freedmen's complex boasted modest furnishings:

There was a row of a dozen or more buildings, which resembled huge wooden boxes. Each house was divided into four rooms or compartments, and in each room was located one family of from five to fifteen persons. In each room was a large fireplace, an opening for a window with a broad board shutter, and a double row of berths built against the wall for beds. One or more low benches, a pine table with "piggins", home-made cedar tubs, on it, completed the furniture.⁷²

Freedmen longer removed from slavery were usually able to attain some measure of comfort. At Camp Wadsworth, Virginia they lived in cabins whitewashed inside and out, and kept the whole camp neat and tidy in appreciation of good fortune and long labor.⁷³

Disease was perhaps the greatest killer of freedmen in the Carolinas. Prolonged outbreaks were an annual occurrence.⁷⁴ In 1864, smallpox and yellow fever erupted at New Bern. Fifty people per week died, whites mostly from yellow fever, and freedmen from smallpox. The town was put under embargo and left to the refugees for management. They tended the sick, buried the dead, and policed the area until the sickness subsided.⁷⁵

In spring 1865 after the surrender of Savannah, one last long train of refugee slaves was released from Georgia. Five thousand found their way across South Carolina along the Union trail all the way to Wilmington and New Bern. Upon arrival many were such haggard victims of hardship, they tottered on the

verge of death. Whooping cough, measles, and malaria plagued them. Their routes to freedom were "marked with freshly made graves."⁷⁶

Near the same time, freedmen at Camp Todd, Virginia were equally haggard and:

destitute of every comfort, ragged, filthy and lying on the floor; few of them having even straw, nearly half are sick, and we might say are dying for something they could eat. Raw meat, tainted by the extreme warm weather, was lying in sight of poor creatures who were in the agonies of death, and raw beans and salt pork and beef, that had been issued to those who were too sick to prepare them for food, or to eat if prepared by others, were scattered everywhere.⁷⁷

Smallpox swept Washington in May 1863. Sick and dying refugees were isolated in a special hospital and nourished only with sugar and farina.⁷⁸ Two black doctors, Rapier and Abbott, operated another hospital and attended freedmen dispersed in the city. They employed freedwomen as nurses and matrons to administer medicines and cook for and feed their patients. Elsewhere in the city, entire families were housed in ten square feet of clapboard shanties for which two to eight dollars monthly rent was paid. Most men were absent in the army or government service, leaving the women in responsibility. Income was earned primarily from domestic work, cooking, cleaning, and laundering. Many women sold items of handiwork fashioned from rags and junk collected in the streets.⁷⁹

Nearby on Mason's Island, freedmen lived in want of fresh water. The entire camp was supplied by one well, but most of the refugees lacked bucket or rope to obtain a drink. Wrang-

ling and contention over what buckets they had kept most in thirst. The timid were forced to drink from a fetid marsh along the shore and contracted and spread many ailments. Much suffering was the result. Malaria struck the adults. Scurvy weakened and killed the children. Whole families died. Grief and bereavement sapped the strength of the living. Inquiry about their husbands, wives, and children received a repetitious answer; "Dey is gone to de graveyard."⁸⁰

And so it was with almost a million refugee slaves during the course of the war.⁸¹ They met death at every turn. Twenty five percent was the common estimate of their mortality.⁸² At the outbreak of hostilities slaves numbered close to four million (see Map 1 census figure). As contraband and freedmen refugees, they fell victim to starvation, exposure, murder, and disease. No accurate count of their dead is possible. Yet the federal census of 1870 gives a hint of the numbers lost during the war and in the five years subsequent to Appomattox. Certainly, theirs was a trial by fire, and in spite of extreme suffering, contrabands and freedmen exerted a common and ceaseless effort to support themselves and the Union cause.

¹Eaton, Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen, p. 2.

²B. A. Botkin, ed., Lay My Burden Down; A Folk History of Slavery, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1945), p. 72.

³Botume, First Days Amongst the Contrabands, p. 11.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1964), p. 109.

⁶Botume, First Days Amongst the Contrabands, p. 34;
 Rupert S. Holland, ed., Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne
Written from the Sea Islands of South Caroline 1862-1884.
 (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1912; New York: Negro Uni-
 versities Press, 1969), p. 27.

⁷Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction, p. 108.

⁸Horace James, Annual Report, pp. 3, 4.

⁹John Y. Simon, The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, p. 16.

¹⁰Colonel Percy Howard, The Barbarities of the Rebels, as
Shown in their Cruelty to the Federal Wounded and Prisoners;
In Their Outrages Upon Union Men; in Their Murder of Negroes,
and Their Unmanly Conduct Throughout the Rebellion. (Provi-
dence, Rhode Island: Printed by the Author, 1863), p. 40.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Second Annual Report,
 p. 31.

¹³Horace James, Annual Report of the Superintendent of
Negro Affairs in North Carolina, p. 35.

¹⁴U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents in the Office of
the General Superintendent of Freedmen, March 1865, p. 62.

¹⁵Executive Board of Friends, Report of the Executive
Board of the Friends Association of Philadelphia, p. 11.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents, March 1865, p. 62.

¹⁸Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps to Captain R. S. David,
August 2, 1862, John W. Phelps Papers, Negro Collection, At-
lanta University, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁹U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents, March 1865, p. 10.

²⁰Percy Howard, Barbarities of the Rebels, p. 30.

²¹Ibid., pp. 23, 29.

²²Ibid.

²³U. S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the
War. Fort Pillow Massacre. Returned Prisoners. 38th Congress,
1st session. Rep. Com. No. 63. May 5, 1864, p. 4.

²⁴Ibid., p. 6.

²⁵Thomas W. Knox, Camp-Fire and Cotton-Field; Southern Adventure in Time of War. Life with the Union Armies, and Residence on a Louisiana Plantation. (New York: Blelock and Company, 1865), p. 315.

²⁶Percy Howard, Barbarities of the Rebels, p. 6.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 57; U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 66.

²⁹Eaton, p. 2.

³⁰Emancipation League, Facts Concerning the Freedmen, pp. 6, 7.

³¹Ibid., p. 7.

³²Eaton, p. 48.

³³Ibid.

³⁴U. S. Congress, Letter of the Secretary of War, p. 17.

³⁵Constance Green, The Secret City, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 66.

³⁶Eaton, p. 31.

³⁷U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 19.

³⁸Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction, p. 240.

³⁹Margaret Leech, Reveille in Washington, p. 251.

⁴⁰U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 18.

⁴¹Charles P. Roland, Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the American Civil War, (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1957), pp. 99, 100.

⁴²Ibid., p. 100.

⁴³U. S., Treasury Department, The Negroes at Port Royal. Report of E. L. Pierce, Government Agent, to the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury. (Boston: Published by R. F. Wallcut, 1862), p. 12.

⁴⁴James McKaye, The Mastership and its Fruits: The Emancipated Slave Face to Face with His Old Master. (New York: Published by the Loyal Publication Society, 1864), p. 17.

⁴⁵Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, First Annual Report, p. 18.

⁴⁶United Presbyterian Church, Historical Sketch of the Freedmen's Missions of the United Presbyterian Church 1862-1904, (Knoxville, Tennessee: Printing Department, Knoxville College, 1904), p. 15.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁸U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 87.

⁴⁹New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 4.

⁵⁰U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, pp. 13, 70.

⁵¹Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Second Annual Report, p. 29.

⁵²New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 70.

⁵³Vincent Colyer, Brief Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army in North Carolina, in the Spring of 1862, After the Battle of Newbern. (New York: Published by the Author, 105 Bleeker Street, 1864); p. 24; and Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen, p. 12.

⁵⁴New England Educational Commission, Extracts from Letters, p. 6; and U. S. Treasury, The Negroes at Port Royal, p. 23.

⁵⁵Yeatman, Report on the Condition of the Freedmen, pp. 6, 7.

⁵⁶U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 70.

⁵⁷Yeatman, p. 12.

⁵⁸U. S. Army, Extracts, p. 10.

⁵⁹NA, RG 105.

⁶⁰Yeatman, pp. 13, 14.

61_{NA}

62 U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, Department of the Tennessee and State of Arkansas for 1864. (Memphis, Tennessee: Published by Permission, 1865), p. 55.

63_{NA}

64_{NA}

65 Yeatman, p. 14.

66 U. S. Army, Report of General Superintendent of Freedmen, p. 60.

67 Western Sanitary Commission, p. 111; U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents March 1865, p. 27.

68 Charles P. Roland, Louisiana Sugar Plantations, p. 99.

69 New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 30.

70_{NA}

71_{NA}

72 Elizabeth Botume, First Days Amongst the Contrabands, pp. 50, 51.

73 Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, First Annual Report, p. 5.

74_{NA}

75 Horace James, Annual Report, pp. 16, 17.

76 Ibid., pp. 57, 58.

77 Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, First Annual Report, p. 5.

78 New York Yearly Meeting of Friends, Second Annual Report, p. 12.

79 Executive Committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Report of the Executive Committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Upon the Condition and Needs of the Freed People of Color in Washington and Virginia. (New Bedford: E. Anthony & Sons, 1864), p. 3.

⁸⁰Board of Managers of the Association of Friends, First Annual Report, p. 11.

⁸¹Robert Tomes and Benjamin G. Smith, The War With the South: A History of the Late Rebellion with Biographical Sketches of Leading Statemen and Distinguished Naval and Military Commanders. (New York: Virtue and Yorston, Publishers, 1862), p. 694.

⁸²McKaye, The Mastership and its Fruits, p. 25; and Henderson Donald, The Negro Freedman, (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), p. 89.

CHAPTER III

EARNING A LIVING

Refugee slaves worked extensively and ceaselessly in support of the Union Army, plantation leasees, and themselves. At first, military expedience demanded their labor. The army became the principal employer of contrabands and freedmen. After the army, leasees, abandoned lands leasors, had dire need of cheap labor. The fallow fields of the South promised riches to those who contracted land and labor to raise cotton. In this endeavor leasees played surrogate to the slave owners and exploited thousands of refugees for selfish personal gain. However, better opportunities were available to the refugees in private and personal employment. Here, through diligence and thrift, former slaves made substantial gains in establishing themselves as independent freedmen.

Initial contact with the federal army immediately opened menial positions to eager refugees; body servants, cooks, messengers, launderers, liverymen, etc. And the further the army advanced into Confederate territory, the more it needed a supplementary labor force. All refugee males deemed healthy and able were conscripted to work at every laborious task; erecting fortifications, building bridges, digging trenches, cutting roads, and repairing sabotaged railroads. They were a welcome

relief to grumbling soldiers who preferred fighting to working.¹ But just as often, refugees were not prepared to engage in any activity beyond supplying their own needs. For various reasons, contrabands "came and went regardless of their agreements or the wishes of their employers. Housekeepers often had a new cook for each meal of the day."²

Freedom of movement and choice of employment were severely restricted with the army. "Any officer who wanted the service of colored men, sent out his guard and pressed them."³ Vagrants and wandering refugees were detained on the streets and marched off to work sites. Refugee slaves of all secessionists were subject to impressment. Mounted patrols rode into contraband camps at all hours of the day and night and forced the men at gun point to pick up and go. Men who hesitated or refused were shot and killed with impunity. Once gathered at work sites, they were kept under guard to prevent escape.⁴ Throughout the South, the desperate urgencies of Union invasion and occupation compelled conscription;

All those who can, but will not work, will be put to work on the fortifications, or at other hard labor. . .I request all persons who know of negroes roaming at large in idleness, or not supporting themselves and their families, by regular and honest industry, to report such cases to me, or the nearest Assistant Superintendent.⁵

Whether skilled or unskilled, refugees found unlimited outlets. Former slave wheelwrights maintained wagons and caissons, blacksmiths made and fitted shoes for horses and mules, and carpenters, coopers, masons, and shipjoiners applied their skills to the Union effort.⁶ Campsites and towns bustled with

activity generated by contraband labor. In river and seaport towns stevedores, dockhands, and deckhands loaded and unloaded munitions and supply ships. Freedmen cut the timber to fuel the ships, piloted raids up unfamiliar streams, and led reconnaissance missions behind rebel lines. They swept refuse from the streets, cooked army meals, washed and pressed uniforms, nursed the sick and wounded soldiers, ran errands and delivered messages. And, for the duration of the war, contrabands and freedmen toiled incessantly digging graves and burying horses and humans.⁷

The healthiest and strongest men and boys and all skilled tradesmen were rated prime number one hands and commanded the highest refugee wages. In some regions pay scales ranged from eight to fifteen dollars per month, but wages were rarely and irregularly issued. Less pay was rated to number two and number three hands. Adolescents, middle aged men, all strong and healthy females were generally categorized number two. The aged and the infantile of both sexes produced less labor and rated the least pay. As number three hands, the amounts of their earnings rarely exceeded payroll deductions.⁸

Refugee women and girls sought cooking and cleaning chores in federal camps and hospitals. Their wages ranged from \$2.00 to \$15.00 per month depending on skills and demand. And often little distinction existed between freedmen army work and slave labor. Women working as hospital matrons at Hampton and Newport News, Va. were once described as slaves to their jobs, working under strict supervision nursing, cleaning, and cooking for battle wounded Union soldiers.⁹ In the Carolinas, Suzie King

Taylor worked as a nurse, teacher, laundress, and spy for four years and saw not one cent of pay.¹⁰ Compensation for labor was more often limited to food rations, clothing, and excuses for withheld wages.

At Port Royal, abandoned Confederate lands were put under the plow as early as 1862. The army hired the contrabands to cultivate the long staple, high profit fleece for federal gain. Fieldworkers were rated \$5.00 per month, carpenters and mechanics, \$8.00. At one location, nearly two hundred contrabands were on payroll working twelve or more hours per day. After three months, nearly \$500.00 in wages were past due. Lack of small currency was once offered as excuse for payroll default. After two successive seasons, freedmen still suffered late and lost wages while the federals counted nearly half a million dollars in profit.¹¹ Federal default was common and widespread; \$30,000 December 1862 at Ft. Monroe, and \$20,000 at Helena, Arkansas where legal subterfuge prevented payments to contrabands while a local court determined to whom the money was due, the laborers or their former owners.¹²

Further, the U. S. Army Engineer Corps employed 2,768 freedmen on federal defenses around Nashville in 1863; 310 were paid. At Clarksville 1,383 freedmen labored on the defenses; 387 were paid. At Ft. Donaldson only 2 of 395 and 71 of 110 at Murfreesboro were paid cash compensation for forced labor. In a short time the army incurred a debt of \$112,292.17 at the above work sites. The most frequent excuse for withholding pay was inability to identify the men to whom wages were due. In

order to secure payment some freedmen had white men and work supervisors to whom they were known, identify them in person or in writing. It was the only way to circumvent total loss of wages.¹³ Payroll policy was typified by the Nashville paymaster who required freedmen

. . .claiming pay for labor to identify themselves in every possible manner needed to satisfy me they are the persons who did the work. If I am not thus satisfied, I do not pay.¹⁴

Yet, in the various theaters of the war, refugee slaves furnished the government a willing source of labor that produced profits far beyond the expense of their rations and wages.¹⁵ In fact, most contrabands were happy for the chance to work against the Confederacy. By June 1863, freedmen labor was so productive at Port Royal, the commandant declared, ". . .the colored people have been no expense to the government." The balance of credit was stacked in their favor. Further up the coast, in North Carolina, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, refugees likewise furnished the federals the full equivalent of their rations and wages.¹⁶

One of the most important tasks that freedmen refugees performed for the Union was woodcutting. This was the industry that supplied fuel for federal ships and trains along the waterways of the South. Supplies and munitions were transported by steamboat on all the major rivers. The army collected refugee slaves in woodyards and lumber camps at regular intervals on the lower Mississippi, and on the Cumberland, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Ohio Rivers. Strategic forested sites near military

camps and towns were provisioned with mules, horses, wagons, equipment, and families of freedmen to cut timber, haul trees, and cord the splintered stakes for easy storage and quick combustion in the boilers of federal steamboats.¹⁷

Corded wood was always in demand, selling quickly and reaping large profits. And woodcutting was a self sustaining industry. Operating expenses were miniscule after sale of large quantities of wood. For instance, one camp near Vicksburg sold 60,000 cords in a few weeks for \$120,000 and spared the government another \$90,000 by underselling private competitors. More yet was saved by freedmen employees who had brought mules, wagons, and gearing from their former homes. Yet, thousands of cords were taken without compensation of any sort.¹⁸

Army superintendents had a difficult time finding humane and efficient woodyard managers. Very few

could stand up to the labor required of them, as they would have under their charge, a camp of one thousand or more people; and have to attend to the distribution of rations, to the work done, and the general improvement of the camp.¹⁹

Some facility in accounting was required to record cash flow from sales, wages, rations, treasury deposits, and Freedmen's Fund contributions. Most managers were overwhelmed and unqualified to handle the responsibility. Many brutalized freedmen and worked them to exhaustion. For both supervisors and laborers, woodcutting was rigorous, day long labor.

Plantation field work occupied refugees in numbers equal to the military. Here, the abandoned properties of Confederates were leased by speculators who trailed the army into the

South. They were known as leasees, men who schemed for riches at the expense of absent owners and former slaves. Each Union victory in the deep South opened up new territories for the leasees and stimulated demands for plantation laborers. To meet their needs, leasees, in collaboration with the army, conducted annual labor drives rounding up and relocating refugee slaves to the plantations for a resumption of cotton cultivation. As inducement, refugees were often promised a suit of clothes, medicine, schools, or a bale of cotton. Whether willing or not, they were forced under gun to comply.²⁰ Through the planting season idlers and vagrants in Memphis, Little Rock, Vicksburg, and Beaufort were captured on the streets and consigned by the army to leasees. In one instant, a camp of 900 refugees was removed from Van Buren Landing, Ms. and 1,200 were marched out of another camp at Blake's Plantation to till the fields of nearby leasees.²¹ To satisfy acute labor shortages in Arkansas, the army conducted a dragnet operation in spring 1863 around Little Rock to round up all unemployed, able-bodied refugees.²²

Leasees rarely concerned themselves with the welfare of their employees. For the most part they were unprincipled and "had as little regard for the rights of the negro as the most brutal slave holder had ever shown."²³ As a rule, they were overbearing taskmasters who worked the freedmen like livestock. Profit was their only motive and they would have it from the soil or from the blood of their workers. Leasees owned neither the land nor the labor and cared nothing for either.²⁴

Plantation work schedules were busiest between March and November. During the spring, in conjunction with labor drives, plantation freedmen plowed and planted the abandoned fields. This phase lasted for a month or longer depending on the acreage to be planted, on the weather, and, on the number and productivity of the workers. Between seeding and the upstart of the plants, freedmen kept busy on food crops, animal husbandry, and building and tool repair. After the young stalks sprouted leaves, workers returned to the fields with hoes and spades to cut weeds and grass from the furrows. This was a daily activity, continuing until buds appeared in early summer. Children large enough to wield a hoe and nigentarian old men were put to task raising cotton.²⁵ On one South Carolina leased plantation the work day began

. . .As soon as the first streak of daylight was visible, all were astir and on their way to the field. . .About eleven o'clock they generally came back to their houses for food and rest, returning by two, and working. . .until the approach of darkness rendered it impossible to continue longer.²⁶

While the blossoms ripened and developed full tufts of fiber, another lull ensued. But autumn arrived soon and all available hands began the harvest. The fields were once again filled with freedmen carrying baskets and dragging sacks--until the stalks were picked clean. After sale of the harvest, leasees settled accounts according to their own reckoning. And, by this time, frost was on the ground. Winter approached and the refugees, no longer needed, were turned out until the next season.

But under U. S. Army and Treasury Department contracts, leasees were advised to pay a standard wage, provide housing, medicine, schools, and clothing to freedmen fieldworkers. In spring 1863, the recommended pay scale was as follows: number one hands, healthy men aged 20-40, \$25.00 per month; number two hands, aged 15-19 and 41-50, \$20.00 per month; number three hands aged 12-14 and over 50, \$15.00 per month. Number one women rated \$18.00 per month, number two \$14.00 and number three \$10.00.²⁷ But leasees were obligated to pay only:

. . .half the monthly wages, either in money, provision, or clothing, until the crops are sold. The first lien upon the crops shall be for the wages of the laborer, and provision will be made by the Superintendent to secure prompt payment of same.²⁸

Such was not the case. First, the wage scales were only a recommendation and paid wages varied markedly from one employer to another. Leasees devised many schemes for deduction to reduce and nullify cash payments to their fieldworkers. Most food and clothing was marked up several times the actual value and charged to the freedmen. Time lost for illness and bad weather was prorated against wages. Crop failure and low sale profits eliminated any consideration of wage payments. Even after a full and productive season, leasees rarely paid freedmen a fair portion of their earnings. By federal estimate, leasee debt to freedmen exceeded \$400,000 at Vicksburg and \$10,000 at Natchez for the 1864 season. Beyond food, clothing and supplies, leasees spent no money on behalf of their employees.²⁹

Repentant rebels filled many supervisory positions on

leased plantations. Treatment of freedmen was typically rough and profane; kicks and blows, the method of motivation, abuse and brutality the rule. Food rations were irregular and often issued in quantities too small to healthfully sustain life. What rations they did receive consisted of salt pork, flour, meal, beans, rice, coffee, and tea, doled out in meager portions. Rations were reduced or withheld entirely from non-producing sick and infirm workers. Freedmen were forced to maximize what resources they had by gardening, hunting, fishing, and foraging. They bought additional supplies on credit against their deferred wages. Few employers bothered to supply the freedmen with garments better than rags and furnished practically no medicines. Their own herbal remedies served them against cholera, scurvy, ruboella, and yellow fever.³⁰

Murder and re-enslavement shadowed the plantation workers. Rebel guerrillas sporadically captured and occupied plantations in all remote and isolated areas. Five regiments of freedmen troops were detailed to protect leased properties along the lower Mississippi. The rebels managed nevertheless to interrupt the planting activities of many leasees, often killing them as well as their refugee workers, or stealing equipment and food, and destroying property.³¹

Private employers offered numerous alternatives to military and plantation work. Entering the cities and towns of the South, refugees discovered many means of self support. At one point 3,000 operated on their own in Memphis under work arrangements devised solely by themselves.³² Unskilled labor

was their common commodity, but many possessed useful skills that found easy outlets. Some were tailors, barbers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights. According to their usefulness, they were encouraged to remain and work as hotel porters, cooks, waiters, domestics, hackmen, hucksters, draymen, and on coal barges and transport ships.³³ Privately earned wages sometimes reached a dollar per day. And for the most part, freedmen thus employed were well able to support themselves and their families.³⁴

All things considered, the best work arrangement for the refugees was self employment. Here, to an extent, they controlled their own means of production and, more importantly, their income profits. The majority of self employed freedmen ventured into farming, an industry in which they were previously skilled. And with their livelihood in their own hands they devoted much effort to the task. But they encountered many difficulties in their bid to lease abandoned farm lands. First, leasees, in collusion with the Union Army, gained the most favorable lands for themselves. In some areas, leasees contracted all available property, leaving none vacant for the freedmen. Special efforts were required of the army and the Freedmen's Department to set aside property exclusively for freedmen leases, to wit, Davis Bend.³⁵

Yet along the Mississippi River between Memphis and New Orleans, hundreds of freedmen secured leases, ranging generally between five and one hundred and fifty acres. More often, single family groups worked the land. In larger ventures, addi-

tional helpers were employed as needed. Poor equipment was a common problem, solved in most instances by increased effort or by crop loans.³⁶ To make ends meet freedmen also performed double duty. After tending their own fields, they marched off to town to do what labor they could, or, on odd hours and weekends, they worked the fields of neighbors or leasees. The woodyards offered an alternative during winter months, and any temporary arrangements available to them were quickly taken. A good many former slaves were thus able to earn a profitable income.³⁷

Of necessity, freedmen made small farm enterprises of their leasing ventures. In addition to cotton, they grew vegetables and fruits in quantities sufficient for winter storage, grain and fodder for their livestock, and they raised pork and fowl to stock their larders with meat. Some degree of success was common to most farming freedmen. In one area along the river, fifty six freedmen raised and sold crops enough to eliminate all their operating debts and provide surplus income for their winter expenses. In the Vicksburg district, in 1864, former slaves leased 180 small farms, cultivated 5,870 acres, employed 380 hands, and provided a living for 1,500 dependents.³⁸ At Davis Bend, seventy-five freedmen with land leases in 1864 raised and sold 130 bales of cotton and gained profits from \$500 to \$2,500. They built themselves comfortable cabins and raised enough corn and vegetables to feed their families and livestock through the winter. On the peninsula, 7,000 total acres were under freedmen cultivation and divided between

181 cooperative leasees.³⁹ Earlier, in 1863, personal profits reached as high as \$5,000. A Home Farm cooperative sold 1,736 bales of cotton, and additional corn, vegetables, potatoes, and melons for \$25,929.80 beyond all expenses.⁴⁰ To the purpose of becoming a haven for freedmen, Davis Bend easily proved its potential. The hardworking refugees repaid the government all equipment and supply debts and showed themselves capable of self sufficient free labor.⁴¹

During the 1864 planting season, the army worm, a voracious moth larvae, infested and decimated most cotton crops in the Mississippi Valley. The greatest losses occurred amongst the largest investors, the white leasees. Many went bankrupt and gave up their ventures. Freedmen leasees were more economical and generally managed to eke out profits in spite of the worm. At Helena, Arkansas they netted a total of \$40,000, with individual profits ranging from \$4,000 to \$8,000. Delta area Home Farms produced 81 bales of cotton and private freedmen, 172 bales for a combined total sale of \$88,172.74 (cotton sold for 25¢ to 35¢ per pound during the Civil War). Government debts were paid and freedmen netted \$29,360.09 to themselves.⁴²

Money in the hands of former slaves attracted thieves of many sorts, gambling soldiers, robbers and rebels, and sutlers. Sutlers were sales agents who sold food, supplies, and assorted merchandise. Prices of goods sold to freedmen were double, triple, and quadruple the actual value. At one point the monetary exchange between freedmen and proprietors at Little Rock was so heavy, government intervention forced price reductions.⁴³

Elsewhere, a Port Royal agent, at a critical buying time, averaged \$100.00 cash per day for items sold to freedmen.⁴⁴ For many refugees, money was not only hard to get, but even harder to hold.

The federal government incurred no debt whatsoever on behalf of refugee slaves. All wages were taxed and deductions for living expenses made in advance of payroll. Along with the working, the sick, wounded and orphaned refugees were provided for. Refugee earned profits supplemented the wages of Union troops and missionary teachers. In Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, careful use of taxes paid by freedmen met and exceeded all expenditures on their behalf.⁴⁵ Profits generated by their labor were consistent and ever on the increase. By January 1864, the freedmen of Port Royal were "self supporting" and needed no further contributions of material aid." North Carolina and Virginia freedmen were similarly productive and no expense to the government.⁴⁶

Immeasurable profits were made at refugee expense. Without doubt, their efforts aided the Union victory. With them the federals commanded in unison a mighty fighting force and a powerful labor force. Where the army marched, there marched the refugees, building fortifications, driving supply trains, mending bridges and railroads. Refugees worked willingly and under compulsion. Their sacrifice of labor and lives helped to save the Union and defeat the Confederacy.

But refugee labor was exploited without fair compensation as much by leasees as by the Union Army. Profits from cotton

raised by freedmen made rich men out of greedy speculators. Nevertheless thousands of refugee slaves gained personal benefit from their own labor before the war ended. Those who employed themselves in farming were especially successful and reaped financial gains that set them on their own feet during the turbulent birth of freedom. But all who labored struggled mightily to earn and claim liberty. Guided by unyielding faith and inspired with heroic courage, they suffered to lay a firm foundation, the cornerstone of which was education.

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¹⁵Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶U. S. Congress, Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate of the 26th of May, a copy of the Preliminary Report, and also the Final Report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission. (Senate Executive Document No. 53 38th Congress 1st Session June 22, 1864), p. 9.

¹⁷U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, p. 23.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 23.

²⁰U. S. Army, Department of the Tennessee, General Superintendent of Freedmen. Extracts from Documents in the Office of the General Superintendent of Refugees and Freedmen. Headquarters, Memphis, Tennessee. March 1865. (Memphis: Freedmen Press, 1865), pp. 4, 27.

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²²U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, p. 4; and U. S. Army, Extracts from Documents, p. 26.

²³Knox, Camp-Fire and Cotton-Field, p. 316.

²⁴James E. Yeatman, A Report on the Condition of the Freedmen of the Mississippi, Presented to the Western Sanitary Commission, December 17th, 1863, (St. Louis: Western Sanitary Commission Rooms, 1864), p. 8.

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²⁶New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Second Annual Report, p. 68.

²⁷U. S. Treasury Department, Report Relative to Leasing Abandoned Plantations, p. 15.

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³⁰Ibid., pp. 28-32, 44-51.

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³³U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, pp. 17, 22.

³⁴New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Report of the Executive Committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends, Upon the Condition and Needs of the Freed People of Color in Washington and Virginia. (New Bedford: E. Anthony and Sons, 1864), p. 39.

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³⁶U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, Department of the Tennessee and State of Arkansas for 1864. (Memphis, Tennessee, Published by Permission, 1865), p. 39.

³⁷U. S. Army, Report of General Superintendent of Freedmen, pp. 38, 47, 50, 51.

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⁴³U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, pp. 17, 67.

⁴⁴Charlotte Forten, The Journal of Charlotte Forten, (New York: Dreyden Press, 1953), p. 6.

⁴⁵U. S. Army, Report of the General Superintendent of Freedmen, pp. 8, 20; and U. S. Treasury, Report Relative to Leasing Abandoned Plantations, p. 8.

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CHAPTER IV

GETTIN' LEARNIN'

After freedom, education was the desire of every slave. In talk and action, refugee slaves sought the forbidden secrets of written words and books. Their arrival in contraband camps brought them quasi-freedom and the opportunity to seek enlightenment. The Union Army and missionary aid societies opened classrooms and schools to accomodate them and teach the three R's. But, where antebellum codes had long prevailed, education demanded a high price in money and blood.

Memphis refugees, as soon as they secured living necessities, petitioned the army for schools. But from autumn 1862 until late winter 1863, Confederate opposition was so bitter and violent that clandestine meetings in the homes of teachers and students offered the only opportunity for instruction. In one of the outlying contraband camps, an evening school was conducted by a lady missionary. After a long day's labor, a small class of army fatigue workers gathered around an old woodburning stove in a rundown little shack to recite lessons from spelling books. Civilian hostilities and threats abounded. The teacher, fearing for her life, was forced to abandon her class. In her stead, the ablest student filled in as instructor and the school continued.¹

A few months later, in February 1863, a Union soldier, T. H. Place, rented the basement of the Beale Street Baptist Church and opened classes. Local freedmen fully supported his effort and paid donations and tuition fees to the sum of \$1,800. Angry rebels burned the building down. A year later, the American Baptist Missionary Society opened two schools on successive dates, one in the Colored Baptist Church in north Memphis, and another in the Second Presbyterian Church. Two blacks, Mr. E. C. Branch and Mrs. Maria Robinson taught at the Presbyterian Church. Other missionary sponsored schools opened at Collins Chapel and in the Exchange Building. Enrollment at the chapel increased from 56 to 180 in the first month. Army supported schools operated in all the local freedmen camps (Presidents Island, Camp Fiske, Camp Shiloh).²

Schools for the freedmen were seldom short of students but almost always lacking in teachers and supplies.³ And, not all refugees who wanted an education could attend classes. Most of the adults worked the full length of the day. Families and individuals were always on the move. Commotion of some sort was ever present in the freedmen camps. Classrooms mixed the young with the old. Sometimes three generations crowded together for classroom training. Perhaps the greatest incentive of the old was to "read de Bible an' teach de young."⁴ To accomodate the irregular schedules of refugees, night schools, Sunday schools, and Industrial Schools were organized and operated after the normal work day. By December 1864 more than 250 adult day laborers attended evening classes at one Memphis school.

Special homemakers' training was offered to women and girls in three Industrial Schools. Cooking, cleaning, and sewing skills were taught. The army supplied cast-off uniforms and the missionaries furnished used clothing for mending and alteration. Thus occupied, Industrial School students supplied needy refugees in the camps with clothing. In one instance, children at the Presidents Island orphan asylum were sent forty shirts, sixty-nine pairs of pants, seventy-four coats, and thirty-seven pairs of foot stockings. Improved living habits were the intended result of industrial training. Results were immediate and long range.⁵

By April 1865, 1,590 students attended eleven Memphis schools under the supervision of 27 teachers. Classes were held Monday through Friday six hours per day. Freedmen wage taxes, tuition fees, and voluntary contributions supported all the schools. But before October 1864, lack of government controls allowed many parties a free hand in setting rates and collecting fees. Fraud was uncontrollable. The government consolidated all schools and passed regulations which forbade the collection of any money except by the Superintendent of Colored Schools or other authorized officials. Freedmen parents were allowed to pay the \$1.25 tuition fees as best they could, in full or any part thereof. When parents could not afford any payment at all, students enrolled without charge. Accrued funds paid all rents, bought furniture, fuel, supplies, and supplemented teacher salaries. During the three term year September 1864 through April 1865, the eight day schools and three night schools

operated without deficit.⁶

In Nashville, the first missionary school for freedmen opened in October 1863 in the Baptist Church on the northwest side of town. "Hundreds, young and old flocked. . .to instruction." A month later another school was opened in Caper's Chapel. Yet, for lack of space, many were turned away. A third school was organized by the army in the freedmen's camp. Through June 1864 all three schools endured a plague of problems. Poor conditions, overcrowded classrooms, equipment shortages, lack of money, civilian violence, and smallpox forced temporary closure of the two church schools.⁷

The freedmens camp school, under the supervision of a black instructor, maintained operations through June 1864. Also, the Caper's Chapel school was reopened in the church basement. Another short-lived class was begun in the Mission Home on McLemore Street but soon removed to the audience room of Caper's Chapel. For months at a time, recalcitrant church members interrupted the classes and caused lengthy suspensions of school by scheduling activities that conflicted with school hours.⁸

A missionary recorded the following comment as an example of local white sentiment;

The time was when the niggers carried the white childrens' books and dinner and waited outside to bring them home. Now we (whites) have no schools and these yankees are opening free schools for niggers. I sometimes feel as if I could tear their hearts out.⁹

In spite of resentment and violence, the refugees and their children went to school. When rented and donated spaces

were not available, cabins, shacks, tents, and trees were used to shelter teachers and students. On the first day of class at nearby Murfreesboro, sixteen scholars huddled around the two broken stoves which could not produce heat enough to melt the particles of snow which fell from the children's shoes. . . . Coffee sacks tacked over the cracks and crevices kept cold wind out. For a while, the poor conditions depressed their delicate northern teacher. But the children were enthusiastic. Two young men kept a good fire going. And every day they cheerfully counted numbers, recited the alphabet, spelled, and read aloud. Three levels of learners were taught simultaneously. Instruction was often disorderly but in the teacher's opinion, learning was better facilitated by the mixture. In the early spring, warmer weather brought even more students to class.¹⁰

The beginning of freedmen schools at Helena, Arkansas witnessed many difficulties, closing often due to overflow of students. One classroom had an average daily attendance of 103 and only one teacher. Here also, another teacher monitored the progress of three students who at first knew only the alphabet, but after seventeen days;

. . . could read with little hesitation lessons in the First Reader, . . . and could spell correctly most of the words; could write legibly without copy; could numerate, and one of them could write any number less than a thousand, and all of them could perform problems in addition, and repeat part of the multiplication-table.¹¹

In 1863-64 eight schools operated in Vicksburg with four teachers and 305 students. Other classrooms were located at Desoto Landing, Youngs Point, and on Paw Paw Island. Indus-

trial Schools in Vicksburg held evening sewing classes for women and girls. During the 1863-64 school year, tuition fees and contributions failed to meet operating expenses.¹² But the schools did not close.

At Natchez, twelve schools and twenty-five teachers accommodated 670 students. A night school was begun here in November 1864 with 25 pupils, five of whom could read in the First Reader, and one in the Fourth Reader. By the end of the month, 178 were enrolled, 6 children and 172 adults. Instruction was given between 6:00 and 8:30 to students divided into Primer, and First and Second Reader sections. Student promotions from lower sections to higher grades was regular, usually occurring in less than a month's time. Nearly one fourth of the students were over sixty, and some over seventy. Their instructor wrote;

It is a touching sight to see these old people "gettin' learnin'," as they call it, coming there night after night--the older ones are the most punctual in attendance--some of them with heads gray and eyes so dim they are obliged to bring with them two pairs of spectacles, one pair to use in reading their books, and the other to see the words and letters on the charts and blackboard; and often when I take the book to hear them spell, the perspiration stands in drops on their faces, in their anxiety to spell correctly, and their fearfulness lest they should forget. We shall soon form these older ones into a Testament class, as their chief desire seems to be to be able to read the Bible and the hymns in the hymn book.¹³

During the last half hour of the evening, 8:00-8:30, all sections united in a writing class, copying from the blackboard on slates and in copybooks. The much pleased teacher intended to make the Natchez evening school the best on the river.¹⁴

Freedmen schools at New Orleans first opened in the autumn

of 1863. By the following spring, 1864, seven free schools served more than 4,000 children between ages 5 and 12. In the surrounding parishes 95 additional schools served 15,840 students.¹⁵ In some cases, treacherous opposition was mounted against rural schools. Nonetheless;

The colored people. . . manifest the greatest anxiety to educate their children, and they thoroughly appreciate the benefits of education. I have known a family to go with two meals a day, in order to save fifty cents a week to pay an indifferent teacher.¹⁶

And elsewhere;

the little ones always enter the school room with their brown faces and hands shinningly clean and with shoes and clothing often woefully patched yet painstakingly neat.¹⁷

During a thunder storm, one dilapidated old country shack let in so much rain that the children had to be shifted from one corner to another to keep themselves and their books dry.¹⁸ Yet they applied themselves in sincere study and first learned reading, beginning with the alphabet, advancing to words of one syllable, two syllables, and so on. Spelling and writing supplemented the reading and arithmetic, grammar, history and geography completed the usual curriculum. After school hours, the children took their learning home and taught non-attending siblings and working parents, 2,000 of whom attended evening classes.¹⁹

Violence and molestation were frequent in the rural parishes. Civilian clamor was ceaseless and rebel guerrillas marauded outside the rule of federal guns. Even Union Army officers opposed freedmen education. "One used to let his dogs

loose after supper to bite the night scholars."²⁰ After dark, the young and the old, risked life and limb to get to class. At once, almost all the schools were destroyed or ransacked, some, continually, for months at a time. And many times during class, angry whites hurled bricks and stones through the windows, against the buildings, and at the students and teachers.²¹

After violence, weather deterred some and impeded others. While winter was more than ill clad children could healthfully bear, spring rains fell in torrents. Roads and pathways turned to thick quagmire and pulled off the shoes of teachers and students who sometimes had to walk several miles to get to school. Smallpox erupted in spring 1864 and forced temporary suspension of classes at many rural schools. After infection, the smallpox death rate averaged 30% in some areas.²² Children were the easiest victims. Their absence from class was seldom willful.

At Port Royal, South Carolina, most freedmen were scattered on sea island plantations where as many as eighteen schools harbored 2,000 pupils.²³ Other schools operated in the town, Beaufort, where the demand for teachers was always greater than the supply. Death and exhaustion claimed many mentors who answered the freedmen's call; "Us wants booklearning, too bad."²⁴ One teacher here was amazed at the children's enthusiasm:

I have never seen children enjoy learning as they do. They exult in their new books as other children do in playthings, and it is rarely that we have to complain of inattention.²⁵

Classrooms witnessed many dramas. Multiple generations crowded into a Beaufort school where;

A man and his wife stood together in a class to read. . . Their children were in the class above them, having conquered words of one syllable. As soon as the parents began to read, the children simultaneously darted to their sides to prompt them.²⁶

Families studied together in class and at home and at work. They had an appreciation for learning that only a slave could know.

Two African churches housed the first schools for freedmen in New Bern, North Carolina. By autumn 1862 school was open day and night. Eight hundred attended the night session. Irate, the Confederate governor closed all the freedmen schools in the state. Children and adults cried in anguish outside the closed school doors. Later, an express copy of the Emancipation Proclamation sent to the governor prompted his resignation. And the schools reopened in a hurry.²⁷

For many New Bern children, the school day was begun without food. At one school missionaries and teachers distributed food (and clothing) to 258 children to relieve painful hunger. Yet, they hungered as much for books. One morning, arriving ten minutes before the start of class, a teacher found 110 new faces crowded around the door hoping to be admitted. Children even collected at his home for the same purpose and to escort him to school. Once arrived and settled into their lessons, the best scholars were designated "officer of the day" and themselves honored. One of the best students was a 25 year old who was self taught from scraps of an old dictionary.²⁸

Sewing sessions were held for women and girls at New Bern Industrial Schools. Garments made and mended were distributed

to the needy in camp. Night schools and Sunday schools numbered with the day schools. Parents worked extra time so their children could go to school. And children who worked sought jobs that allowed time off for study and when possible, worked not at all to attend class full time. Curriculum varied slightly except in adult classes where "reading" was the primary interest. The Bible was their one book of interest.²⁹

Similarly, concerning Virginia tidewater freedmen, a government agent observed;

. . .in general place a high value both on education for their children and religious instruction for themselves. In Alexandria, and in various other places. . .one of the first acts of negroes when they found themselves free, was to establish schools at their own expense; and in every instance where schools and churches have been provided for them, they have shown lively gratitude and greatest eagerness to avail themselves of such opportunities of improvement.³⁰

Word of mouth spread news of new schools. A Norfolk class grew from 20 to 300 in a few weeks. Hard working freedmen at Alexandria pooled \$500 and built their own school house. Three black women taught 228 pupils, 140 average per day. At the same camp, \$30,000 was spent on materials, supplies, and labor for construction of cabins.³¹ Owning themselves, schools and homes, freedmen flexed their minds and muscles to start a new life, a free life. For many, it was enough reward to live to see the day:

In an old building near Norfolk, without any floor, and with no fire. . . (we) found four aged men, probably from 60 to 80 years of age; they had nothing to lie upon but a plank apiece, and no covering but some old rags. . . yet they thanked the Lord that they should die free.³²

Conclusions

Certainly the experience of contrabands and freedmen was one of hardship and heartache. Hot on their heels were angry and possessive owners, slave catchers, rebel guerrillas, and the Confederate Army. Refugee slaves lived on the run, hungry, sick, naked, and wounded. They wore dirty rags and ill fitting garments made out of homespun cotton, flax, and burlap. They had not enough shoes, in winter and summer too many bare feet touched on the ground; not enough food, too many empty stomachs and no doctors and no medicines. Uncertain of refuge or freedom, they collected in the hundreds of thousands in Union camps. But throughout the war, captures were made within the Union held territories and inside Union camps. Thousands of recaptured slaves were murdered. In camp they endured privations of every sort, exposure, hunger, and disease. Essential supplies of food, clothing, medicine, and shelter were prioritized for military purposes. The refugees suffered abuse and murder at the hands of Union soldiers and civilians. They met death at every turn.

Yet, the stimulus for emancipation was provided by the fugitive slaves who overwhelmed the Union Army. Together with abandoned slaves, they comprised a mighty labor force on the side of the Union. Under cruel compulsion and under their own initiative, they went to work. The increasing value of their labor was recognized in progressive legislation leading to emancipation. Two Confiscation Acts were passed by Congress

(August 1861 and July 1862) which liberated the fugitives of rebel owners and forewarned liberation of all slaves still in possession of rebel owners. Finally, the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) made legal "freedmen" of most contrabands, but the slaves of loyal owners were not liberated until passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. The loss of vital slave labor was the blow from which the Confederacy could not recover.

What the Confederacy lost, the Union gained, inspired laborers whose intent was freedom and the defeat of the Confederacy. Federal expense for munitions, supplies, and soldier's wages were supplemented through contraband-freedmen labor. Refugee slaves raised cotton and vegetables and cut timber to fuel ships and trains. Men and boys took up arms, and they built fortifications and breastworks, dug trenches and canals, cut roads, repaired bridges and rail lines, shoed horses and mules, and made and mended wagon wheels. Women and girls raised cotton, cut wood, and nursed sick and wounded soldiers, cooked their food, washed, ironed and repaired their uniforms. Immeasurable profits were made at refugee expense. However, the advantages gained by them were more often the result of their own diligence than the fair play of their employers. Neither the Union Army nor the plantation leasees acknowledged the worth of refugee slave labor with just compensation. A debt remains unpaid.

But, for the refugee slaves, freedom had no price tag. A new life was ahead of them and opportunity to control their

own lives, to work for their own benefit, to marry legally in sight of God, to preserve their families, to choose their own names, and to educate themselves and their children. They helped bring forth the day from which they would call no man master. For this, they waged not a Civil War, but in their own words, a "Freedom War."

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¹⁶James McKaye, The Mastership and its Fruits: The Emancipated Slave Face to Face with his Old Master. (New York: Published by the Loyal Publication Society, 1864), p. 18.

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²⁰Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

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²⁴Elizabeth Botume, First Days Amongst the Contrabands (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), p. 63.

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